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“You Expect Them to Listen”: Immigrant Teachers’ Reflections on their Lived Experiences

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Abstract: The stories shared by the immigrant teachers capture some of their personal and professional lived experiences in their new teaching environment. The hermeneutic narrative approach of the study of seven immigrant teachers’ stories, as they compared their teaching experiences in their home country to their New Zealand teaching experience, offer insight into the teaching and learning context that they had come from and the transitional challenges they faced. Some of these challenges may be attributed to attitudes and beliefs, curriculum matters, and pedagogical approaches. These challenges, combined with their determination to pursue their teaching career in an environment that may be dissimilar to their own, provides the context for this study. The findings may not only inform overseas teachers that are contemplating a move to New Zealand about the adjustment challenges but also provide educators with understandings of the diverse teaching and learning backgrounds that immigrant teachers may come from.

Introduction

Reflecting on one’s practice in the school context has, in the last few years, been initiated for practitioners in New Zealand classrooms by the Ministry of Education (2007). Classroom experiences offer an obvious context for teachers to reflect on their practice. Immigrant teachers’ reflections of their practice offer an added focus as they position their gaze beyond the New Zealand classroom by comparing their past experiences with their present practice. Through the immigrant teachers’ reflective stories of their classroom practice emerge understandings of their lived experiences as practitioners in the New Zealand classroom context. While all teachers enter the classroom context with their own values, beliefs, ideas of teaching and learning (Seah & Bishop, 2001), and unique histories (Peeler & Jane, 2005), this paper focuses on the experiences of the immigrant teachers in New Zealand classrooms. Through the reflective narratives the teachers share their unique experiences that may have wider relevance to New Zealand’s increasingly diverse school environments that have seen a steady growth in immigrant teachers from a range of countries in the past two decades (Harrison, 1998; Ward & Masgoret, 2008).

Studies have shown that teaching practices that immigrant teachers come from may be framed by ideologies of teaching and learning other than those of their host countries. According to the studies of Hirabayashi (2006) and Li (2006), teachers from a Confucian Heritage Cultural background, may be accustomed to the knowledge transmission teaching approach, in an environment where the teacher is viewed as the fountain of knowledge and accorded with utmost respect by the students (Brown, 2009). These classrooms traditionally

comprise silent students that do not disrupt the teacher (Han & Scull, 2010) and corporal punishment is practised as the norm for non-compliance (Kaufman, 2004; Krajewski, 2006). Teachers from a background influenced by Buddhist philosophies may be used to being revered as the “giver of knowledge” (Baker, 2008, p.138) that should not be questioned by students. Evidently ideologies of the Confucian Heritage Culture and the Buddhist philosophies seem to suggest a relationship between the teacher and the student to be superior and inferior respectively (Hirabayashi, 2006; Li, 2006). While various studies have presented particular views of practices in certain countries, it is important to note such findings cannot be generalised because experiences of practices are individual and personal in nature. The intention of the study is certainly not to homogenise the qualities and experiences of teachers, instead it is premised in the notion that each teacher’s narrative about a new teaching context is unique.

Studies of immigrant students’ transitional experiences in their new countries may be indicative of the cultural context of schooling in their home countries. A recent study by Jhagroo (2012) on the lived experiences of immigrant school students has presented the differences in classroom experiences from ten students’ perspectives between their home countries compared to the New Zealand mathematics classroom environment. Their perceptions of cross-cultural experiences surfaced in the form of the immigrant students experiencing different degrees of cultural shift in their new environment. Some of these cultural differences included coming from a background with only single-sex schools, a classroom where corporal punishment is practised to modify student behaviour, a silent classroom environment, an individual study context where class discussion is not encouraged, and a strict non-confrontational classroom environment where the teacher is regarded as the transmitter of knowledge (Jhagroo, 2012). These different cultural experiences in the classroom echo the findings of other international research studies, for example, studies that provided an understanding of the practice of corporal punishment as a means of correcting student misbehaviour in Nigeria (Chianu, 2000), in Korea (Brown, 2009), and in Asia to instil high academic expectations in accordance with Confucian Heritage culture (Krajewski, 2006; Han & Scull, 2010), the strict cultural background from which immigrant students often come (Tanners, 1997) and the subordinate position of the students and the high status accorded to teachers (Baker, 2008). These differences mentioned by the students signal the dissimilarities in pedagogical practices that immigrant teachers must deal with in their new environment. While some New Zealand studies have shed some light on challenges faced by immigrant teachers they have not provided the depth of understandings that each story extracted through this study is anticipated to provide.

In this paper the lived experience narratives of seven immigrant teachers in New Zealand originally from Japan, China, Fiji and India will be brought to the fore in an attempt to understand their transitional experiences as they reposition themselves in a new context. The term immigrant teacher is used to describe the participants that were all born outside of New Zealand, are migrants to New Zealand and are currently teaching in schools. In order to teach in New Zealand schools, all teachers are required to be registered with the New Zealand Education Council have certification to teach, furthermore overseas teachers’ qualifications are assessed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. While the transparency of this process allowed the participants to satisfy both these criteria in order to be employed as teachers, the actual pathway to finding jobs and their experiences in the classroom seem more complicated and less understood. While the varied contexts may present challenges it is essential for immigrant teachers to connect and familiarise themselves with practices of their new context (Ball, 2000) if they are to succeed as teachers.

Research Approach

The narratives of the immigrant teachers directed us as researchers towards a hermeneutic narrative approach. The positioning of the study within the hermeneutic paradigm emerged from the idea of realities being divergent and dependent on who is creating it (Reichardt & Rallis, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). These realities are multifaceted interpretations of lived experiences. Within the shared narratives each experience mentioned by the immigrant teachers was viewed as a key contribution in terms of understanding and interpreting their lived experiences in their new context as teachers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In addition, I was mindful of the social construction of realities prevalent in narratives and that participants “act according to the meaning they attribute to things and persons; their reality is socially constructed … it is necessary to see the world through their eyes” (Krathwohl, 2009, p.242).

The aim of this is to study examine the past learning and teaching contexts of each teacher in an attempt to understand their worldviews and the challenges they may face in the New Zealand classroom environment. What each teacher brings to the teaching and learning context is anticipated to inform new-teacher professional learning initiatives and teacher education programmes in which immigrant students continue to be part of.

Immigrant teachers were invited to participate in the study if they had practised as teachers and/or experienced learning as students in their home country and had been employed as teachers in New Zealand. Recruitment involved a networking approach and recommendations where the first participant was known to the researcher and recommended another potential participant. Subsequently each participant recommended one or more potential participants until the required number of participants was obtained. Interviews were conducted to collect the stories of the immigrant teachers. The interview did not follow a predetermined set of questions, instead the participants were invited to share their experiences as teachers in New Zealand. The participants took the opportunity to talk about their current experiences, and related these to their past experiences as teachers and/or learners in their home countries. The intention was for the participants’ voices to emerge as they reflected on their lived experiences and transitional experiences in the New Zealand classroom. The researcher listened with minimal interruptions and only asked questions to prompt conversation and clarification. Each participant chose a convenient place where they preferred to have the hour-long interview. Since all the participants were employed as teachers in the New Zealand classroom context, it was assumed that they would have had a proficient level of English and therefore the interviews were conducted in English. The conversations were recorded on an audio digital recorder, transcribed, verified by the participants and later analysed by the researchers.

The immigrant teachers’ narratives suggested that they had come from a range of teaching and learning backgrounds. Each teacher provided a preferred pseudonym that was used throughout the research process and arising reports or publications. This paper is based on the narratives of seven immigrant teachers. Garima and Rekha were originally from Fiji, Erica had come from Japan. Ninu, Rene and Ravi had come from India, and Klayra had come to New Zealand from China.

Themed Narratives

The analysis of the narratives involved listening to the recorded interviews, reading the transcriptions, identifying themes and colour coding these for each story. While a range of experiences were identified, for the purpose of this paper the experiences will be discussed

under three reflective themes, attitudes and beliefs, curriculum, and student-centred learning, that surfaced from the stories of seven immigrant teachers. The themes are used for the purpose of a critical discussion and the narratives of the experiences are intended to be heard from the voices of the teachers. Through the extensive use of the actual words of the teachers this paper provides a platform for the stories to be heard.

Reflecting on Attitudes and Beliefs

Most of immigrant teachers in this study had come from eastern countries, and two teachers of Indian ethnicity, had come from the Pacific Island of Fiji. The superior position occupied by the teacher in studies of eastern cultures (Baker, 2009; Brown, 2009) was affirmed in this study as the teachers reflected on their position in the New Zealand classroom and their home countries. Fijian teachers seemed to command a similar teacher-dominated, disciplined classroom context in which the teacher talks and the students listen (Seah & Bishop, 2001). The immigrant teachers in this study presented similar views. This notion also seemed to be held by immigrant students and surfaced in a New Zealand study that examined the lived experiences of immigrant students (Jhagroo, 2012) where students experienced challenges in contributing to class discussions and talking to the teacher or their peers in the classroom. A study done in the United States of America asserted that immigrant students from classroom backgrounds, that instilled quiet individual study, saw the students in their new student-centred environment as lacking in discipline (Tanners, 1997). This view may also be indicative of the expectations of teachers that come from a similar background.

Garima, an immigrant teacher who had taught at a secondary school in India, echoed the sentiments of the other immigrant teachers from India about the status of the teacher. She stated that in India the *teacher was literally the boss* who had the *sole power to decide what you are going to do in the class and the students were more like the followers ... and you expect them to listen to you*. She emphatically stated that, *in New Zealand the student behaviour was shocking*. The extreme contrast in behaviour towards the teacher sometimes seemed to have been too much to cope with, some were reconsidering their decision to pursue a teaching career, *but here [in New Zealand] its different, that's why I thought I better change my profession*.

Erica, a third year secondary school immigrant teacher, also expressed a difference in, not only the students' attitudes towards the teacher in Japan and in New Zealand. She drew from her own experiences as a student in Japan and from her father's experience as a teacher in Japan. According to Erica, students in New Zealand classrooms often did not listen and she attributed this to lack of respect for the teacher, *if the teacher is not respected... they don't really follow the instructions*. Respect for the teacher was not only confined to the students but also their parents and Erica felt that this was a challenge for her in New Zealand, *parents actually really... respect teachers [in Japan], whereas in New Zealand it's not always the case, like especially as a young teacher I often struggled especially in my first year. I really struggled to gain the respect from students as well as their parents*.

In addition, Erica speaks of feeling disrespected by immigrant students who see male teachers as being *higher than female really so they find it... hard to... listen to the female teacher like me... because of their cultural background*. Immigrant students that come from cultures that prohibit the interactions between genders at schools and have only been exposed to a single sex school experience may experience a paradigm shift as they transition in their new environment (Jhagroo, 2012). This may have implications for not just immigrant teachers, but teachers of immigrant students and other students in the classroom environment. The challenge of interactions with the opposite gender has implications for classroom

practice as was reported by Erica, *it can be quite hard to work as a class together. And sometimes in group activities or group discussion some students from different cultures, don't want to work with a different gender student.* The choice of working within specific genders was also evident in the study of immigrant students by Jhagroo (2012). While for some students interacting with students of the opposite gender may present transitional challenges, for others it might be embraced as a welcomed change (Jhagroo, 2012).

Ethnic, cultural and language backgrounds also seemed to have been at the centre of perceived negative attitudes held towards the immigrant teachers. Ninu, an early childhood teacher and Rene, a primary school teacher from India felt a sense of helplessness or disempowerment in their new context. They felt that in spite of the children *showing us no respect, no care for our feelings, we have to listen to them, we can't correct them. It is very different from the Indian culture.* Ninu also reflected on another incident where an angry student younger than 5 years old, *told me that I was black... she told me that her mum told her that I'm black and therefore she didn't have to listen to me.*

Racial discrimination also appeared to have contributed to the teachers feeling a sense of worthlessness. According to management, *we [Indians] were not allowed to use our native language when speaking to others* [Indians on a personal level], and *parents also would say to management please don't take Indian teachers.* Rene too, mentioned the abuse that she was exposed to as a relief teacher by intermediate students, *I was sworn at, I was criticised for my colour, for my food, they [the students] called me a black Indian B---, surprisingly the school did not take action, those students were free to go.* Evidently schools seem ill-prepared to cope with the challenges of the growing multicultural face of education. It seems a shame that diversity of both the teachers and students is seen as a problem to be fixed for the purpose of conformity (Jhagroo, 2012) instead of being embraced in developing competency in diverse ways of thinking and learning (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Like the immigrant teachers from India, Rekha an immigrant teacher from Fiji spoke about her experience of racism recalling comments such as, *go back to your country, being thrown at her by the student.* According to her, this is common practice but immigrant teachers do not report it because *they are afraid that their job will be gone.* Racist attitudes have forced some immigrants to change their names to be accepted in the New Zealand context, *once they [employers] see an Indian name they... you cannot get a job whatever qualification you have they just put your cv aside. A friend used his Indian name when he applied for jobs, he did not get any, not even interviews. Then he used a kiwi name, he was called for an interview.* The immigrant teachers' desire to change their name, and their reservations in talking to senior school managers about racial prejudices being experienced may be attributed to the difficulties that they experience in finding employment. This phenomenon has been documented in other studies of immigrant teachers since migration across borders became more and more prevalent. Weintraub (1993) documented the prejudice and resentment of western immigrant teachers in Israel, Dewar and Vissar (2000) reported that most of the overseas-trained teachers seemed to be employed in schools that are hard to staff in lower socio-economic areas in New Zealand. Not much had changed as Narayan (2009) too found, a few years later, that immigrant women experienced difficulty finding employment in New Zealand schools. An Australian study by Booth, Leigh and Varganova (2012) also revealed a significant difference in the response rate or call back rate for the fictitious resumes that were sent out to prospective employers. Resumes with ethnic names received a lower call back rate compared to those with Anglo-Saxon names.

Unlike the Narayan (2009) and Booth, Leigh and Varganova (2012) studies that specifically explored discrimination in the workplace and discrimination in seeking employment respectively, the intention of this study was not to elicit experiences of racial discrimination, instead the focus was on understanding the experiences of immigrant teachers

in their New Zealand classroom context. The indicative questions did not relate to the teachers' experiences in finding employment and the narratives of the seven immigrant teachers were shaped by what they chose to share. The stories have unearthed both the underlying beliefs and views of teaching and learning, as well as perhaps, the more sinister attitudes of racism on multiple levels. These shared narratives of discrimination may be understood in what Narayan (2009) refers to as institutional racism where cultural difference seems to be stifled for conformity, and personal racism of exclusion. While the changing classroom expectations of the teacher may be addressed through focused professional learning, the sense of disempowerment or helplessness to act on one's experience of prejudice seems to be more problematic and too complicated to address. A sense of being devalued, not only affected the identities of the teachers, but also seemed to have created an unhealthy environment that affected relationships between themselves and other members of the learning community including students, colleagues, and parents.

Reflecting on Curriculum

The immigrant teachers reflected on notable differences in the curriculum and implementation of curriculum in their home country and their New Zealand teaching context. For all seven teachers the background that they seemed familiar with were those of inflexible curriculum structures often dictated at national level, set textbooks specified for the different subjects, and a curriculum that is highly assessment-oriented with an accentuated focus on academic achievement. Comparatively, the New Zealand curriculum is a national document for schools that encompasses education for children from new entrant to year thirteen. Unlike, a content focused curriculum, the New Zealand curriculum is future-focused with a vision of the students as 'lifelong learners who are confident and creative, connected, and actively involved' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6). The curriculum document defines a set of values to be 'encouraged, modelled, and explored' and five key competencies that are considered to be fundamental for 'sustained learning and effective participation in society' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6). How the vision is achieved is determined by the individual schools and the teachers, with teachers having the flexibility to choose their teaching and learning resources.

Garima's story presents a picture of the structured content delivery of lessons in the Indian classroom which had a *syllabus and the set curriculum for year. So it* [the decision about what was to be taught] *wasn't that difficult*, it was predetermined. Furthermore, each subject had a specific text, *you got a book for physics, you got a book for bio, for math, but here it's not like this... you don't have any books it is very flexible.* Erica also expressed a similar context in Japan where *there is a set national curriculum that all schools follow and learn at the same time and the government subsidize[s] the text books so all students can receive the text books for free.* When comparing both contexts, Erica felt that, the Japanese system *is a great system.* She attributed this sentiment to cost of resources, *in New Zealand students have to pay for the homework books. I know that some students really struggle financially.* This challenge with resources results in New Zealand teachers having to find the time to make their own resources that could be accessed without cost by all students, *it's quite hard for teachers too to use certain homework books so teachers have to make their own resources.*

New Zealand teachers also seem to spend a lot of time making resources and planning lessons, often during their school holidays. As Erica points out, *we actually spend lots of time making the resources like worksheets, powerpoints, it could be anything and so that takes up a lots of my time, as well as planning for the lessons.* In spite of Japanese teachers being

provided with the resources needed to teach, they are expected to be at school during school holidays. *They [teachers] get their annual leave like four weeks off so... paid. Unless you apply for it you have to go to school and you know that there is nothing to do, you just have to go to school and pretend that you are working.*

A study by Wu and Zhang (2006) found that immigrant teachers from eastern countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam experienced an assessment-driven curriculum (Wu & Zhang, 2006) in which students compete for positions. Erica mentioned that *exams are very important* in Japan as it gives students entry into higher education. Klayra also spoke about the fact that students *in China studied for the exam, to pass the exam.* New Zealand schools are not devoid of assessment practices. Since 2009, New Zealand learning in primary and intermediate schools have been reshaped by the emergence of the National Standards in reading, writing and mathematics. According to Thrupp (2013), students up to year 8 are subjected to these achievement standards and teachers are expected to make overall teacher judgements of student achievement using a four-point scale, 'above, at, below or well below' (p. 99). From year 9 students attend secondary school, however, at year 9 and year 10 levels they are not exposed to any national assessments. National assessment recommences at in the form of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement as the main national qualification for secondary school under the guardianship of New Zealand Qualifications Authority. At year 11, students complete their level 1 certificate, at year 12 they complete level 2, and at year 13 they complete a level 3 certificate.

The structured academic focus of the curriculum seemed to have been implemented at early childhood centres in the home countries of the immigrant teachers. According to Ravi, a Montessori teacher, *we had to educate them [students younger than five] to write sentences in English in India, but here there are very few five year olds that can write their name.* Klayra, too spoke about the structured learning that children are exposed to in China, *from the day the child enters school, they learn extra things, after school like piano lessons or drawing lessons.* Unlike the academic focus of the countries mentioned, to these immigrant teachers New Zealand presented a context of *messy play, and freedom to think and choose.*

The highly structured curriculum that the seven teachers were familiar with seemed to suggest the lack of teacher voice and autonomy in decision making in the curriculum and teaching and learning design. While their narratives suggest that they worked through the challenges of their new autonomy and flexibility in the New Zealand classroom, which involved searching for teaching materials and developing resources, it seemed as if each teacher found the holistic focus on education in their new environment, more appealing than the assessment-driven past curriculum that they had been accustomed to.

Reflecting on Student-Centred Learning

Classroom practices and the pedagogical experiences seem to be areas that presented a need for the teachers to modify their own practice. From the narratives of immigrant teachers, it seemed as if the primary difference in the classroom was the shift from teacher-directed learning to student-centred learning. The need for change by the teachers may be attributed to practices inherent in the New Zealand classroom that encourage student inquiry and student directed learning towards taking 'every opportunity to continue learning and developing their capabilities' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 42). The immigrant teachers acknowledged that the New Zealand Curriculum is underpinned by the idea that students discover new ways of learning and knowing through their own inquiries rather than be presented with a body of content knowledge.

For Garima and Ravi, who had taught in India, and Erica who had taught in Japan, teacher-directed learning was the norm and depicted the teaching and learning environment that they had been familiar with. The teacher-focused, structured classroom environment with students' desks facing the teacher, who is the giver of knowledge, had also been commented on by Carola Suarez-Orozco and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (2001) in their study of immigrant students.

Ravi spoke about his challenge in flexible learning spaces where learning may take place anywhere, including happening outside the formal classroom. The structured learning contexts that he had been used to was different to the New Zealand learning environment, especially in early childhood centres that present non-structured opportunities for learning both inside and outside the classroom. For him this new learning environment required some adjustment because the Indian learning environment that he had been familiar with comprised *classroom teaching, the teacher [teaches] and children learn inside the classroom, here [in New Zealand] they learn inside and outside.*

For Garima, *teaching in India was more about the teacher rather than the students. It was more about like memorizing the facts.* In contrast she praised the New Zealand teaching and learning context and felt that in her new context she is able to meet the diverse needs of her students rather than concern herself with meeting the curriculum requirements, *here is a good system, bright students are given different assignments to the other children. Everybody is doing something different... like the personal learning needs rather than the whole curriculum needs.* Ravi too reflected on *classes in India that were teacher-oriented where the teacher delivered the lecture, here [in New Zealand] it is totally child oriented, where teacher follows the child.*

While for Erica, *in Japan teaching is almost like lecturing... like teachers are always talking in front... and students are writing down and listening*, she felt that she could use her experiences in Japan and New Zealand to inform her teaching practice positively. *I can implement sports, a good thing for Japan. Students in Japan are so motivated and sometimes fall asleep on their desk while working so hard, if I can use the strategies of how to motivate the students in Japan in New Zealand it could work.* Erica's inward reflection of being able to motivate her students may be attributed to students from eastern cultures having a preference for "demanding teaching" to support them towards academic success (Kaufman, 2004, p.1294). Student motivation to succeed in Japan according to Erica, may be attributed to the fact that *there is always competition and you always have to... compete... to pass the entrance exam for university, so it's really exam oriented.* This is consistent with Ueno's (2006) assertion of Japanese students striving to achieve academically because it offered them entrance to higher education.

In spite of having to adjust to new pedagogical approaches, which sometimes seemed to challenge their ideologies of teaching and learning, the immigrant teachers in this study seemed to have embraced student-centred learning as a positive change in their approach to teaching and learning. Professional learning through active observations were seen to be important in understanding a pedagogical shift in the teaching approaches, *I learnt a lot watching teachers... teaching as a whole class, [to] teaching as a group teaching.* The shift in pedagogical approach was seen very positively as new learning that involved student-directed learning rather than, *rote learning* in an environment where the teacher directed the learning and the students listened, and did as they were told.

Conclusion

The narratives of the immigrant teachers provided some understandings of the challenges that they endured as they acculturate as teachers in the New Zealand classroom. While the professional challenges they face may require a change in pedagogical approach and expectations, personal challenges of prejudice that they feel obliged to endure may be detrimental to their identity and sense of being. It is hoped that by offering the teachers a platform for their stories to be heard, their feeling of value may be rekindled. In addition, engaging in reflective narrative through recollections of one's past experiences within a present context may be professionally beneficial in giving the teachers an opportunity to reflect how their own background and experiences may influence on their practice.

The narratives of the teachers suggest their determination to embrace change in their practice and their resilience to adversity as important contributory factors to their success as practising teachers in New Zealand. In addition, the on-going reflections of the teaching experiences in both, their home country and in New Zealand, should not be underestimated and may be invaluable in the immigrant teachers' own professional learning as they extract elements from their own past and present lived experiences to enrich their teaching and learning practice.

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